

**Homily of Archbishop Michael W. Banach,
Apostolic Nuncio to Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands,
at the Mass celebrated on the occasion of the
Annual Catholic Theological Institute (CTI) Day
Holy Spirit Seminary Chapel - Bomana
June 26, 2015**

(Acts 22:3-16; Mark 16:5-18)

1. It is a great joy for me to be with you this morning and to celebrate with you Catholic Theological Institute Day 2015, as well as to participate in the annual Singkai Lecture. Thank you, Fr. Vnuk, for your kind invitation.

The Patron of CTI is Saint Paul. This is most fitting, for St. Paul is considered the "Apostle to the Gentiles." Many faithful missionaries who, like St. Paul, courageously and generously preached the Gospel of Christ in these lands converted PNG and Solomon Islands to Christianity.

Is that the only reason why St. Paul is Patron of CTI? Or do the life, example and words of St. Paul have something deeper to say – to say to those who practice and teach theology, to those who are studying theology? If we reflect on Paul's life, as presented in today's first reading, we will indeed find some of the deeper reasons for St. Paul being the Patron of CTI, as well as the challenges he offers to all those at CTI in 2015.

2. *Saint Paul, theology and the search for meaning.* At the beginning of today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles, the second account of his conversion, St. Paul is presented as a "Jew...educated strictly in our ancestral law and ... zealous for God." We are told he was a "persecutor [of the Christian] Way to death" and that he set out for Damascus "to bring back to Jerusalem in chains for punishment [the Christians] there as well."

Paul clearly shows that he once thought about Christ in a way of which he is now ashamed. His animosity towards Christians, when coupled with his Pharisaic interests, would have driven him to flesh them out. Paul was a Pharisee and so he would have believed in some kind of resurrection. No Christian could avoid speaking of Christ's Resurrection. Yet Paul did not believe a word of what he heard about Jesus. His Resurrection must have been some sort of a trick, because God could never reward anyone who had set himself above the Law as Jesus did.

The pre-conversion St. Paul, or Saul, was confused; he had a distorted sense of purpose in life and a distorted relationship with God; perhaps, despite his zeal, his life was even without meaning. And that's why theology is important, even necessary, today.

The theologian's passion is meaning. Ultimately, theology is about the meaning of God's word addressed to all human beings. When believers accept this word, the universe becomes meaningful as God's creation, and human lives gain meaning from God's saving grace in Christ, leading to guidance for living given by God's word and the Holy Spirit. Such a word of meaning is a call to discipleship that believers try to live out. Theology seeks to draw out the meaning of God's word and of the new life that word gives birth to. Ultimately, theology is about the human person's relationship with the God revealed in Jesus Christ, for "the truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light" (*Gaudium et spes*, no. 22).

And that is the first challenge of St. Paul to all those at CTI: in a rapidly changing PNG & SI, help believers, help all men and women of goodwill, to find meaning in their lives by renewing and re-dedicating your lives to reflection on, study of and preaching the God revealed in Jesus Christ.

3. *Saint Paul, the initiative of Jesus, and Christian theology.* In the middle section of today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles, we hear about St. Paul's his conversion

experience. We learn of "a great light from the sky [that] suddenly shone around [him]"; of "a voice" who asked: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"; of a voice who revealed himself as: "I am Jesus the Nazorean whom you are persecuting."

Whatever happened on the road to Damascus, we can be absolutely certain that as a result of the experience Paul knew with the inescapable conviction of direct experience that Jesus who "was crucified under Pontius Pilate, suffered death and was buried" was alive. The Resurrection of Jesus that Paul had so zealously dismissed as a fraud proved to be a fact. This recognition completely changed Paul and his value system.

The radical nature of this turn around is illustrated by Paul himself when he writes: "καὶ κατελήμφθην ὑπὸ Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ" or "I was apprehended or taken hold of by Christ Jesus" (Phil 3:12). Literally, Jesus arrested Paul and set him on a completely different path. This path led Paul to accept Jesus as Christ and Lord, and to accept the duty to proclaim Jesus as Lord to the pagan world.

And here is the second challenge of St. Paul to all those at CTI: Paul's conversion comes entirely from Jesus. He is the one who finds the lost soul. When we discover that we are known well and loved by Jesus, that changes everything. A Christian theology worth its name, then, must not be a simple repetition of words and intellectual concepts, but it must bring those who teach and study it into a living contact with Jesus Christ, the one who changes our lives, our world, in fact everything.

The German Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner was once asked who was the greatest influence on his theology. His response? St. Ignatius of Loyola. Why? The founder of the Jesuits developed his Spiritual Exercises, a retreat that every Jesuit makes designed to foster a more intimate relationship between the Jesuit and Jesus Christ.

4. Saint Paul, the Church and coherent Christian witness. In the final section of today's First Reading, St. Paul relates how he was told to "Get up and go into Damascus"; he "could see nothing because of the brightness of that light." Having arrived in Damascus, he was brought to Ananias, who told Paul: "Regain your sight" and "You will be his witness before all to what you have seen and heard." In the first account of his conversion in Acts 9, we even hear that after meeting Ananias "immediately things like scales fell from Paul's eyes and he regained his sight."

Still in shock after his encounter with Jesus, Paul somehow got to Damascus and made contact with the Christian community there. He encountered the Church and was welcomed into it through baptism. Paul came into contact with the tradition given over by Jesus' apostles to the first Christians; Paul then further transmitted in a vital way this same tradition in his preaching.

For the Catholic, to do theology is to do theology in the Church and with the Church. The meaning of what the apostles transmitted cannot be articulated all at once, but has to be drawn out gradually over time by contemplations based on Scripture, by study and insight, by lived experience, and by the preaching of those called to pastoral leadership. Because theology's quest for meaning is based on the apostolic tradition, it is also oriented to the whole life of the Church.

And here is the third challenge from St. Paul's experience to all those at CTI: Ananias is described as "a devout observer of the Law." Those who practice and study theology are called to be like Ananias: to be disciples, to be devout observers of the commands and teachings of Jesus Christ. As priests and future priests you are here at CTI to pass these teachings, commands, and Way, onto those you work with, on to those to whom you will be sent. Ultimately, your personal lives and testimonies are to be that light that "blinds" others and starts that process of helping the scales fall from their eyes. When others begin to see your different way of life as disciples, when they see the joy in you that comes from following Jesus, their scales will begin to fall off. Prayer, study and service are necessary so that you can be authentic witnesses. You need to keep responding to God's call in your lives in the same way

Ananias responded when the Lord called him to go minister to Saul: "Here I am, Lord" (Acts 9:10).

5. Congratulations on CTI Day 2015! You are indeed privileged to have St. Paul as your Patron. He challenges you to help the women and men of today to find meaning for their lives in God. From his place in heaven, St. Paul is praying so that you might enter into a living and life-long relationship with Jesus Christ. He wants you to be faithful to the Church and to live a coherent lifestyle in and for her, and so invite others to see and experience the wonders of God.

To be able to do all that – and you can! – you will need to rely on prayer. May these words of St. Paul inspire you:

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that he may grant you in accord with the riches of his glory to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in the inner self, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the holy ones what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to accomplish far more than all we ask or imagine, by his power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Eph. 3: 14-21).